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ABSTRACT

Rumor can be viewed as a collective transaction whose component parts consist of cognitive and communicative activity; it develops as men caught together in an ambiguous situation attempt to construct a meaningful interpretation of the situation by pooling their intellectual resources. Of central importance in the construction and acceptance of a rumor is a state of high tension existing in the rumor's public during the time of its formation. The widespread rumor that John F. Kennedy was still alive (in a heavy guarded hospital room in Dallas) is perhaps an example of a rumor which formed during a time of low excitement, but which still achieved public acceptance. Probable reasons for the acceptance of the rumor are that 1) it formed a plausible explanation for the incongruous behavior (with that of her previous White House image) of Jacqueline Kennedy in marrying Onassis, 2) it did not require the public to accept a large departure from where they last saw the president or from his last known--before death--condition and 3) the report was legitimized by nationally or regionally known "authorities" and purportedly by the mass media. (SH)

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RUMOR CONSTRUCTION: AN ANALYSIS OF A CASE HISTORY

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Abstract

When a past First Lady changed her image, many people who comprised her public could not change their image of her just as suddenly. In this contradictory state many of these people found a plausible definition of the situation in a report that her late husband was still alive--and her actions were a result of her efforts to conceal his condition. On examination, this report met the requirements for rumor acceptance and dissemination.

Further, the study revealed a major factor in the rumor: the presence of a legitimizing element. The specific nature of this legitimizing element permitted the rumor a national audience, for it utilized (1) an authority, and (2) a medium of mass communication, a source of verified news in a mass society.

RUMOR CONSTRUCTION: AN ANALYSIS OF A CASE HISTORY

The investigation of rumor transmission has customarily been in an artificial setting where the investigator planted a rumor in some system, such as a company or a department in a bureaucracy and then traced its dissemination. In these instances when rumor has been studied in its natural setting, the rumors investigated have normally been transmitted in times of high collective excitement, that is, under conditions of war, riots, disasters and the like.

Recently a rumor of nationwide interest was disseminated during times of low collective excitement (day-to-day living). The rumor, that the late president, John F. Kennedy, was still alive, offers the social scientist an opportunity to study a rumor with a large public, under conditions of normal living, and in a natural setting.

Rumor defined.

Rumor is viewed as a collective transaction whose component parts consist of cognitive and communicative activity; it develops as men caught together in an ambiguous situation attempt

to construct a meaningful interpretation of the situation by pooling their intellectual resources.[1]

Thus, from a sociological perspective, rumor is a collective effort to find a definition.[2]

Of central importance in the construction of a rumor is the state of tension (collective excitement) existing in the rumor's public during the time of its formation. These states of tension determine the demands that will be made of the rumor, including its content, transmission, and nature of the communication channel.[3]

The Kennedy Rumor.

By January of 1969 there was a widespread rumor in the United States that the late John F. Kennedy was still alive. A synthesis of the several versions (see appendix for copy of rumor) then being circulated included the following elements:

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[1]Tomatsu Shibutani, Improvised News: A Sociological Approach to Rumor (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1966), p. 66.

[2]Kurt Lang and Gladys Engel Lang, Collective Dynamics (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1961), p. 52.

[3]See Reed H. Blake, "The Relationship Between Collective Excitement and Rumor Construction," The Rocky Mountain Social Science Journal, Vol. 6, No. 2 (October 1969), pp. 119-126.

1. The late president was alive and living as a vegetable in a sealed-off room in a Dallas hospital, which was kept under a 24-hour guard.

2. Jacqueline Kennedy's marriage to Aristotle Onassis was a fake, which allowed the family friend an opportunity to assist the widow by taking John Kennedy (in time) to his private island where Kennedy could live out his life in seclusion.

3. Hiding from the American people the fact that Kennedy was still alive would permit another Kennedy to capitalize on public sentiment in a future bid for the White House.

Rumor Demands.

Each level of collective excitement makes certain demands on rumor. For instance, in times of high collective excitement, rumor dissemination is restricted only by physical barriers, since it passes through spontaneously formed channels. However, in times of low collective excitement the construction of rumor is not only restricted by the formalization that surrounds everyday relationships but also must be consistent with cultural definitions.

A case in point here is provided by the Hiroshima incident. Shortly after the dropping of the bomb, there began to fall

large, bloated drops of rain. The rumor soon spread that the rain was really gasoline, and that soon the whole area would be on fire. Since this was a time of high collective excitement, normal checks on "reality" were not invoked on the message. Soon large numbers of people were preparing themselves for this eventuality.

On the other hand, the Kennedy rumor was disseminated in times of low excitement; hence, it must meet certain demands before it will be accepted. In short, it must be viewed as a plausible definition of the situation by the rumor public.

What were the ways the Kennedy rumor achieved public acceptance? Or, to put it another way, what did the Kennedy rumor include that kept it from being rejected? An investigation of this rumor discloses the following:

First, this rumor does not require its participants to accept a large departure, physically, from where the American public last viewed their president or a large departure from his last known--before death itself--condition. The late president is not seen walking (in good health) down a packed

street in Hong Kong, nor was he sighted in a theatre in Europe. Not at all; he is in a room in a Dallas hospital, living as a vegetable, and receiving medical treatment.

Second, while many people were still dejected over the assasination, and the widow was reported as disturbed that the murder had been committed by an unknown communist, rather than death being by the hand of some anti-civil rights element,[4] the mass media has concerned itself with reports coming out of New Orleans on the conspiracy charges made by Jim Garrison, on the Warren Report, and other such news stories. But to the knowledge of the investigator, no news article has reported the content of the rumor, except as a rumor. Consequently, with this low level of unsatisfied demand for news regarding the rumor content, the level of verified news then becomes high. How did the Kennedy rumor meet this demand?

It is interesting to note that in all the versions of the rumor collected by the investigator, two major aspects were present:

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[4]William Manchester, Death of a President (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 407.

1. A nationally or regionally known "authority" was cited.

2. The report was said to have emanated from a medium of mass communication--a source of verified news in a mass society.

These two aspects played a critical role in the acceptance of this rumor. In short, they legitimated the report. They made it possible for otherwise discerning and/or uninterested people to accept the rumor as plausible.

The more frequently mentioned "authorities" included F. Lee Bailey, noted criminal lawyer; Howard Miller, the conservative Chicago radio personality; Johnny Carson, host of NBC's Tonight Show; and Truman Capote, author of In Cold Blood, and other books.

The more frequently reported media include the Chicago Sun-Times; the National Informer; the Tonight Show; Radio WLS (Chicago); Parade magazine, the Sunday supplement; and the two news magazines, Newsweek and Time.[5]

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[5]A common but interesting fact emerged here. Behavioral scientists are aware that few people outside of academe inquire as to what issue, what page, what station, etc., a report came from; simply the name of a magazine, newspaper, or broadcast station is enough.

The investigator discovered again the operation of this phenomena. For instance, in a Mountain West bank, some employees

Condition for Rumor Construction.

Rumor is viewed here as a group activity as people, caught in an ambiguous situation, pool their intellectual resources to define that situation. What, then, is the ambiguous situation that spawned the Kennedy rumor? One point-of-view suggests that the rumor grew out of the actions of the late president's wife.

In the late Sixties, a large portion[6] of that vast public who took an interest in what Jacqueline Kennedy did, found

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were enjoying an after-hours social to celebrate the bank's anniversary when the branch manager walked in and told the celebrants in all solemnity that John F. Kennedy was still alive, relating the story much as it appears on the mimeographed sheets. (Soon after, with spirits dampened, the party dissolved.) At the story's conclusion, the manager suggested that the employees read about the situation in Time magazine. Of course, no one asked for an issue date or page number. Nor could the manager have told them, for earlier, when he received the story, the teller stated, and he accepted, "It's all in Time magazine."

When I questioned one of the bank employees later, she reported to me, "If anyone had been skeptical to that point, that Time verification was the clincher."

[6]While there is no data available from which to construct an audience profile, it is felt the Kennedy rumor public is centered for the most part, among the lower socio-economic groupings of our society. With this in mind, an examination of the rumor content can be quite telling. Note in the mimeographed copy of the rumor such phrases as the following:

"The term'Primary Belief' seems to be somewhat confusing," which begins the supposedly published Time article by Truman Capote. For people whose lives are far removed from the social sciences, the whole opening paragraph has the ring of authority.

themselves in a world of contradictory elements when the former first lady, so long looked upon as a cultural elite in fashion, entertainment, art, etc., suddenly stepped out of character and announced she was going to marry a much older man, whose personal life was incongruent with the morals of mainstream America. It was at this point in time that the Kennedy rumor appeared. To the rumor public, it was a reasonable explanation as to why such an incomprehensible thing could be happening.[7]

Indeed, it sounds just like another "fact article" from a woman's publication.

Others would include, "...the fact that the Kennedy coffin remained unopened"; "...because the content of the letter would have an extremely detrimental affect"; "Assuming the Mrs. JFK actually visited"; etc.

[7]So reasonable, in fact, became the rumor that, unlike most rumors, the report was disseminated via mimeographed copies. When one of these copies fell into the hands of Howard Miller, a conservative radio personality in Chicago (Radio WLS), he read the report over the air. His disclosure cause so much excitement in the Midwest that heretofore silent agencies were forced into action:

Truman Capote's editor at Random House issued a disclaimer on the report.

Time stated the article never appeared in the magazine and the nature of the subject has not been given editorial consideration.

Albert E. Jenner, Jr., senior counsel for the Warren Commission, made a public denouncement of the rumor.

And Truman Capote appeared on the Tonight Show and denied having written the story.

Columnist Walter Scott explained this apparent reversal in the widow's character when he wrote in Parade that when Jacqueline Kennedy occupied the White House she was given an all-American image by her press agents not strictly in accord with her true character.[8]

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[8]Wrote Scott: "By background and predilliction, Mrs. Onassis...is an international jetsetter. She is interested in herself, clothes, jewelry, antiques, social functions, style, and the high life with the Beautiful People. When she occupied the White House she was given an all-American image not strictly in accord with her true character.

She was never shown smoking although she is an inveterate smoker. She was never shown clothes-shopping although she spends anywhere from $25,000 to $50,000 per year on her wardrobe and jewelry.

At 40 Jackie Onassis is a woman of breathy charm, superficial knowledge, and carefully cultivated beauty who meets all the requirements of the Continental hostess. In Aristotle Onassis... she has found her near perfect mate. Truth to tell, her second marriage is in many ways a far better match for her than was her first. The late John F. Kennedy was so thoroughly American that he liked to play touch football. On balance,... Mrs. Onassis is not the paragon that the White House press agents made her out to be." See Walter Scott, "Personality Parade" Parade, August 3, 1969, p. 2.

While many people could accept a new jet-set image of Jacqueline Kennedy, many others could not. As a result, the rumor of a still-living president found widespread acceptance among them because it left the widow in her original character. She was not dishonoring her late husband's memory, as some were claiming; rather, she was preparing a place for her husband where he could live out the remainder of his years in seclusion. Still in character, she was not really married to the older Onassis, just pretending to be--and for very noble reasons.[9]

Another explanation for the rumor comes from folklorists at Indiana University, who view the rumor as a legend in the making. The feeling among some at IU is that the report "incorporates the older motif that a certain hero, recently 'dead', is in fact alive," although reduced to a state of dependency (and, hence, hidden away). They point out that this was told of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and of matinee idol James Dean, "both of

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[9]The strength of the definition--at the time--was emphasized after the investigator had given a discussion on rumor construction to a ladies club, in which the Kennedy rumor had been used as an example, and three of the members came up following the meeting and in essence said, "How else can you explain why she did it, if Kennedy isn't still alive?"

I couldn't "explain it," and the three club members, I'm sure, went off still convinced the report was true.

whom were said to be in sanitariums in the South."[10]

This hero-still-alive theme is a universal one. For instance, many in America as well as in Europe still hold to the belief that Adolph Hitler is still alive and living in South America. Every country, every era has produced these kinds of stories. Yet this theory does not explain why the rumor starts--only that it tends to emerge upon the death of some heros and not others.

The cognitive approach, it is felt, offers a more logical explanation of the rumor's formation and dissemination.

Conclusions.

In conclusion, we can say that the Kennedys had their publics, people concerned and involved in the consequences of the Kennedys' behavior. When the image of the former first lady suddenly changed, the definitions of many in these publics could not change just as suddenly. In this contradictory state some found a plausible definition of the situation in a report that the President was not really dead and that the First Lady was carrying on a guise to protect her husband from the public glare (and/or to

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[10]F. A. deCaro and Elliott L. Oring (eds.), "JFK Is Alive: A Modern Legend," The Folklore Forum (Bloomington: Indiana University Graduate Department), Vol. 2,No. 2 (March 1969), p. 54.

pave the way for a second Kennedy to occupy the White House). On examination, the rumor met the requirements for acceptance and dissemination. Yet, over time, additional reports supporting the new image of Jacqueline Kennedy began to pile up, and new collective definitions replaced old ones. Thus the rumor peaked and waned. It is no longer adequate to the situation.

One aspect of the Kennedy rumor deserves additional attention: the presence of the legitimizing element. The specific nature of this legitimizing element permitted the rumor a national audience, for it utilized (1) the so-called authorities, and (2) the medium of mass communication.

This may have some implications for the future study of rumor, particularaly as the world moves more and more toward industrialization, and hence, to a greater participation by the mass media in the lives of everyone.

At this point, then, some questions present themselves.

Despite the fact that the rumor was a definition of the situation, could it have enjoyed as large an audience, or been transmitted over as lengthy a period of time, if the two legitimizing aspects had been absent?

What might have been the course of the rumor if it had had only one legitimizing aspect--only a supposed author, or only a supposed mass medium by which it was disseminated?

Was it the fact that it was a "reprint" that made the mimeographed copies so popular?

And, finally, has the rumor really peaked and waned? Or will the Kennedy rumor take its place in the storehouse of American folklore? Legend, after all, is but a solidified rumor, which is passed on from generation to generation. Reinforced by its usage, it becomes part of the cultural heritage. Just as the transmitter of a rumor is not held accountable for the veracity of his message, the teller of tales is not held for the truthfulness of his legend. Rather, the legend's popularity is derived from its entertainment value. Consequently, when the times are conducive, the Kennedy rumor may well be revived. Like many a rumor-turned-legend, will the Kennedy rumor be resurrected again and again?

APPENDIX

What follows is a copy of what I have come to call the "western version" of the widely circulated mimeographed copy of the Kennedy rumor. It differs from the "eastern version" in that the latter report has Jim Garrison close to discovering the "truth" about the Kennedys, which hastened the Onassis marriage, and the hoax was to prepare the way for Robert (and in later versions, Edward) to run for the presidency.

- C O P Y -

DEAD OR ALIVE

From TIME Magazine by Truman Capote

The term "Primary Belief" seems to be somewhat confusing. A "Primary Belief" could mean individual standards on life, such as a moral code, a religious belief, or a particular outlook on life in general. The meaning of "Primary Belief" could also be totally unrelated to personal life. "Primary Belief" could mean a particular way of looking at a particular problem or national event. It is within this second area that this paper shall

concern itself. The personal primary belief to be discussed is the death of John F. Kennedy. The particular point of view is that John F. Kennedy is not dead.

Such a belief must have adequate reasoning to support it. The method of reasoning to be used in this paper is the establishment of a relationship between several minor, almost unknown events which occurred from Nov. 22, 1963 to the present time. The relationship of some events are almost horrifying.

First is the fact that since Nov. 22, 1963, it has been reported that there is a room in Dallas Hospital which has been kept under armed guard. The only people ever entering or leaving that room have been doctors. With the existence of such a room, one can legitimately ask himself, Who or what is in the room and why is the room kept under constant guard?

The second factor which seems to have some relevance to the case lies in the fact that Kennedy's coffin remained unopened throughout the funeral. The reason given was that the President had been shot beyond recognition. Though this may be true, and since no formal autopsy was ever performed to verify the story, could there be no body in his coffin?

Next are all the questions and events concerned with the Warren Commission report and the letter of President Johnson. I remember well the day of disclosure of the Warren Commission report and Earl Warren's admittance over national television that, "The full truth of the assassination of President Kennedy will be brought into light only after many years." A day later, Warren retracted his statement. Again the question may be raised, "Just exactly what did Warren mean by his original statement and why did he retract it?" As for the Johnson letter, it also leads to skepticism of what has been labeled the "truth." Shortly after the Warren report was issued, Johnson wrote a paper, sealed it, and gave orders not to have it opened for 75 years because the content of the letter would have an extremely detrimental affect on the American people.

The last and most critical area of the Kennedy question lies in Mrs. J.F.K., now Mrs. Onassis. First a report in recent Time Magazine stated that Mrs. J.F.K. has visited the grave of her slain husband only five times since Nov. 22, 1963. When asked about the report, Mrs. J.F.K. had no comment. Assuming that Mrs. J.F.K.

actually visited the Dallas Hospital over 340 times, why not a comment, why so often, and why so silent?

Another strange factor concerning Mrs. Kennedy is her marriage to Onassis. A recent Newsweek article states that there has long been a good relationship between Onassis and the Kennedy family, making Mrs. Kennedy obviously no stranger to Onassis.

However, several questions remained unanswered about the nature of this relationship. Why would a middle-aged woman marry a man 62 years old who is destined to die within a few years? Why would she risk being excommunicated from the Catholic Church to marry him? Why would an American Roman Catholic Cardinal strive to prevent her excommunication on the basis of a letter from her, the contents of which were burned and sworn to secrecy? All of this has happened within the course of a few weeks.

Admittedly much of the evidence is little more than a rumor. The news media has fouled up from time to time, but I cannot keep from wondering whether John F. Kennedy is alive or not. The logic behind this evidence stands strong. My theory is as follows:

John F. Kennedy was shot on Nov. 22, 1963. Though Kennedy was incapacitated, he did not die. The Kennedy family chose to

allow the citizens of the world to believe that he was dead and to carry on life in normal fashion. There was perhaps a selfish motive here, in making a martyr out of John. From 1963 to the present, John F. Kennedy has remained in the Dallas Hospital under heavy guard and visited regularly by his wife. The purpose of Mrs. Kennedy marrying Onassis was to establish a new, more secure place for her husband to stay (for example, Onassis' island) which leads me to believe that perhaps Onassis and Mrs. Kennedy really are not married, but posing as married to have an excuse to be on the island most of the time.

Unique, the theory may be, but is it, nonetheless, reasonable? Perhaps in 75 years we'll know.